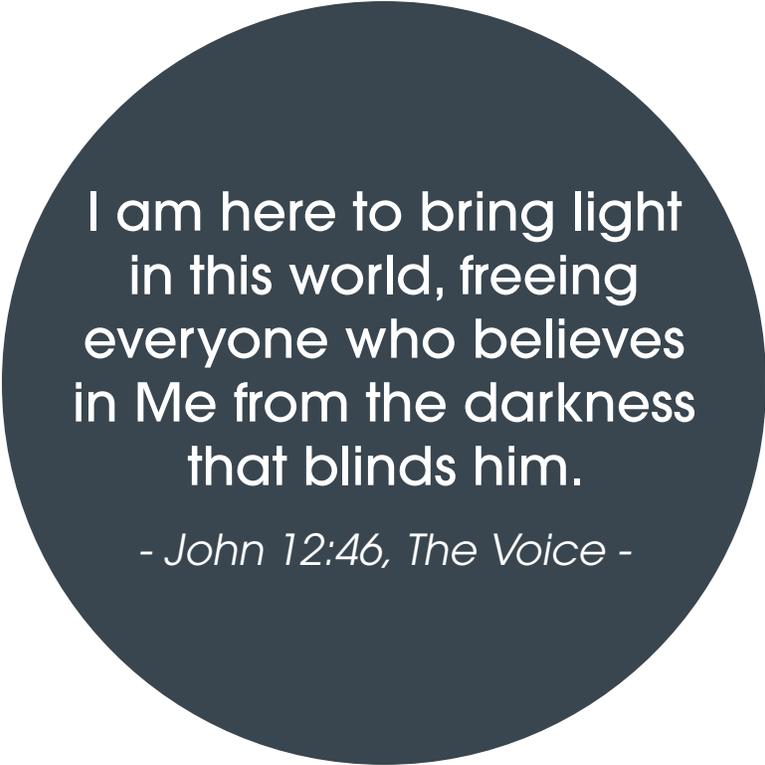




awaken

A LENT STUDY GUIDE



I am here to bring light
in this world, freeing
everyone who believes
in Me from the darkness
that blinds him.

- John 12:46, The Voice -



introduction

The symbolism of darkness and light is a common technique in all art forms. Antagonists (the “bad guys”) are often cast in dark clothing or shadow. Bright brush strokes represent goodness and hope. There is something about this contrast that draws our attention, heightens our senses, and begs to be seen.

The Gospel of John uses this symbolism throughout its narrative to direct us to the deeper realities of truth versus falsehood and life versus death. As we journey through the season of Lent to Easter, we will examine several stories from the Gospel of John that illustrate this tension between light and darkness. Jesus, the Light of the world, came so we might be drawn out of our darkness and into His glorious light.

ABOUT LENT

In the Church calendar, Lent is the time of the year when we mourn over our sins and realize just how dependent we are on God’s mercy. During the 40 days before Easter, Lent reminds us that, because of our sins, we are all going to die. We were formed out of the dust of the earth, and we will return to ashes after we breathe our last breath (Genesis 3:19). It is for this reason many believers place ashes on their foreheads on the first day of Lent (Ash Wednesday). The ashes remind us of our sins and their devastating consequences.

But Lent also reminds us of the hope we all have in Christ. Lent concludes with Easter Sunday—a powerful reminder that God’s “yes” to life is louder than death’s “no.” Jesus has not abandoned us in our sin and death, but He came so that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Jesus, the Light of the world, conquered the darkness of death.

Traditionally, the Sundays during the season of Lent are considered “fast days.” Although they are a part of Lent, they are not counted in the 40 days of Lent. Set aside Sundays for a time of celebration and the special things that are life-giving to you and your family.

HOW TO READ THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John is often compared to a pool in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim. The narrative is simple and the plot movement is swift, yet it contains some of the deepest theological concepts for our Christian faith. If an artist were to paint a portrait of Jesus based upon John's account, they might use bright light, bold strokes, and compelling symbolism.

To make the most out of reading the first eleven chapters of John, take note of these major themes:

- John is full of dramatic contrasts—such as light/darkness, truth/falsehood, belief/disbelief, spirit/flesh. These artistic features are overt and subtle—look for them in both the narration and the dialogue.
- Jesus is constantly getting into trouble in the Gospel of John. In fact, scholars have noted the whole book sounds like Jesus is being scrutinized on trial. The Jewish people are constantly challenging Jesus, and legal language is used throughout their dialogue. For example, in Jewish court, a witness needed the testimony of two other men for his account to be credible (Deut. 19:15). Often, Jesus says, “truly, truly” or “verily, verily” (the New International Version and The Voice translate this as “I tell you the truth”). Note the repetition—Jesus is using this courtroom language to verify Himself! To the frustration of His listeners, Jesus doesn't need other witnesses to prove what He is saying is true (see where the Pharisees challenge this in 8:13).
- Compared to the other Gospels, which portray Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew), the suffering servant (Mark), and the universal Savior (Luke), John portrays Jesus as a wise sage. His teachings are full of wisdom, symbolism, and profound truth. This association with wisdom is no accident, because Jewish tradition taught Wisdom was tied to creation itself (Proverbs 8). Wisdom is a “tree of life” to all who embrace her (Proverbs 3:18). In John's Gospel, Jesus is Wisdom personified. He not only speaks the truth, but His death and resurrection give life to those who believe.

reading plan

We recommend that you read the Gospel of John in *The Voice*, a unique translation that casts the Bible as a stage play. This dynamic version is a thoughtful and sensitive collaboration of scholars, artists, and poets. In order to present John's Gospel in the dramatic and engaging way the first listeners would have heard it, we encourage you to read the entirety of John in this translation. You can find The Voice translation at BibleGateway.com.

| | MON. | TUES. | WED. | THUR. | FRI. | SAT. |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| WEEK 1 | X | X | 1:1-18 | 1:19-28 | 1:29-34 | 1:35-51 |
| WEEK 2 | 2:1-11 | 2:12-22 | 2:23-3:21 | 3:22-36 | 4:1-26 | 4:27-42 |
| WEEK 3 | 5:1-14 | 5:16-30 | 5:31-47 | 6:1-15 | 6:16-24 | 6:25-59 |
| WEEK 4 | 6:60-71 | 7:1-13 | 7:14-24 | 7:25-53 | 8:1-11 | 8:12-20 |
| WEEK 5 | 8:21-30 | 8:31-41 | 8:42-59 | 9:1-12 | 9:13-34 | 9:35-41 |
| WEEK 6 | 10:1-21 | 10:22-42 | 11:1-16 | 11:17-37 | 11:38-44 | 11:45-57 |
| WEEK 7 (HOLY WEEK) | 13:1-17 | 13:18-30 | 13:31-38 | 18:1-27 | 18:28-40 | 19:1-42 |

session one

Begin your time together by dimming the room and lighting a candle or a strand of string lights to illuminate your space. Ask a volunteer to lead the group in prayer, opening yourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read John 1:1-18 in The Voice translation.

Interpretation help: The “Voice” (logos in Greek; some translations say “Word”) is a Greek concept that referred to the divine order in the universe. It is reality in order, the way God intended our world to be. The Jewish people had a similar concept about Wisdom being present when God created the cosmos (see Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:22-31). By calling Jesus the “Word” or the “Voice,” the author of the Gospel of John is not equating Jesus with the Bible, or the “Word of God.” Jesus is reality, the Wisdom who brought everything into existence and brought order out of chaos.

REFLECT

- **Optional:** If your group is following along with the reading plan, spend a few moments discussing any reflections you have from your reading. What did you notice? How did God speak?

- Re-read verses 1-5. Why do you think the authors of John decided to begin this Gospel in such a way? What connections do you see between this and the first creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-5?

- John the Baptizer is described in our passage of study as the first person to “clearly articulate the source of this Light” (v. 6). How did John point others to this Light (see John 3:22-36)?

- How might God be calling us as His people to be witnesses to His light? What kind of posture is necessary for this to happen?

- Jesus did not illuminate from afar, but He drew near to us even though we live in darkness. What did Jesus risk by coming to us? Why do you think His own “refused to listen and receive Him” (v. 11)?

- More often, we’re aware of where God is not. We’re quick to point to His absence and slow to point to His presence. Why do you think this is often the case? Under what circumstances might we fail to recognize Jesus in our own world today?

- If we do not recognize the Light, we cannot point others to Jesus like John did. What would it take for us as God’s own to be aware of God’s glory and to testify to God’s glory today?

- How might the Father be making Jesus known to you right now (v. 18)?

respond

To close, read verses 16-18: “Through this man we all receive gifts of grace beyond our imagination. You see, Moses gave us rules to live by, but Jesus the Anointed offered us gifts of grace and truth. God, unseen until now, is revealed in the Voice, God’s only Son, straight from the Father’s heart.” Pray by going around your group and asking each group member to name a gift of grace or truth Jesus has given them. Finish with a brief “thank you.”

session two

Begin your time together by dimming the room and lighting a candle or a strand of string lights to illuminate your space. Ask a volunteer to lead the group in prayer, opening yourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read John 2:23-3:21 in The Voice translation. Assign group members different parts to read (Narrator, Jesus, and Nicodemus) for a dramatic effect.

Interpretation help: The chapter and verse numbers were not original to the first manuscripts but were added much later. Many New Testament scholars believe the narrative in chapter 3 should actually begin with 2:23-25. These verses function as an introduction to Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the Samaritan woman in chapter 4. The narrator states in 2:24 that "Jesus saw through to the heart of humankind," and His interactions with these two people demonstrate this truth.

REFLECT

- **Optional:** If your group is following along with the reading plan, spend a few moments discussing any reflections you have from your reading. What did you notice? How did God speak?

- In the Gospel of John, there is frequently a contrast between light and darkness. In our passage today, Nicodemus went to Jesus at night. Why do you think the author told us this? What could be the significance of this? (Note: There are no right or wrong answers—scholars are divided on this point. Use your imagination!)

- A Pharisee like Nicodemus would have stressed a careful observance of the Law as a means of salvation, but Jesus insists a radical rebirth is necessary to see the kingdom of God. Some scholars view Nicodemus' questions in verses 4 and 9 not as an indication of ignorance or bewilderment, but as an indication of resistance. Why might have someone like Nicodemus been resistant to Jesus' truth?

• Name a time when Jesus challenged something you once believed. How did you react? Why do you think we are often resistant to ideas that are contrary to what we already think?

• Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if someone does not experience water and Spirit birth, there's no chance he will make it into God's kingdom" (v. 5). Although there is some debate, the "water" Jesus mentions most likely refers to repentance. Water makes us think of baptism—a theme that appears in the passage right after this (3:22-36). John's baptism was different from our understanding of a "Christian baptism." John's baptism was for repentance, while our Christian baptism is for witness. Repentance—being washed of our sins—is necessary for salvation. Christian baptism is not. We often think about repentance being necessary for our faith, but Jesus pairs water (repentance) with Spirit. Why do we also need God's Spirit to enter the kingdom of God?

• Many of us are familiar with John 3:16. How does putting it into the context of the rest of this passage (especially 3:16-21) give deeper meaning to it?

• What do you think it means to love Light and hate darkness? What would it look like for us personally to embrace what is true and enter into God's Light?

respond

Allow for a time of spontaneous prayer before closing your time together.

session three

Begin your time together by dimming the room and lighting a candle or a strand of string lights to illuminate your space. Ask a volunteer to lead the group in prayer, opening yourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read John 4:1-26 in The Voice translation. Assign group members different parts to read (Narrator, Jesus, and Woman) for a dramatic effect.

Interpretation help: A Samaritan was a person who claimed lineage through the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyria because of their idolatry and unjust treatment of the poor and marginalized (see the Old Testament book of Amos). When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, some of the Northern Israelites intermarried with the Assyrians. The Judeans (Southern Kingdom Israelites) treated these ethnically-mixed people as second-class citizens because they were part-Gentile. Samaritans became not just an ethnic group, but also a religious group, because they differed on some key beliefs—such as where to worship.

REFLECT

- **Optional:** If your group is following along with the reading plan, spend a few moments discussing any reflections you have from your reading. What did you notice? How did God speak?

- Re-read John 2:23-25. This segment sets up Jesus' conversations with both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. What are some indications Jesus knew what was in the heart of this woman at the well?

- Think back to your last session about Nicodemus (spend a few moments looking back over chapter 3, if you like). What are some similarities between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman? Differences?

- In our passage today, Jesus goes to a woman of questionable social standing in the middle of the day. This broke custom in a number of ways: Jewish men didn't approach women alone, much less a Samaritan woman. What does this tell us about Jesus?

- In the ancient world, a woman did not have the ability to divorce her husband—only the man was capable of annulling a marriage. The fact that she's had five husbands demonstrates the level of her brokenness and heartbreak. How does Jesus shine light into this woman's darkness?

- John 4:24 says, "The Father is spirit, and He is seeking followers whose worship is sourced in truth and deeply spiritual as well." What does it mean for our worship to be truthful? Spiritual?

- Jesus loves us at our darkest. He doesn't wait for us to "get our lives together" before offering us eternal life. Is it alarming to think Jesus already knows everything about you? Comforting?

- After this story, the woman told other Samaritans about Jesus (see 4:39-42). Why do you think that the woman pointed others to Jesus but Nicodemus did not? Why do you think the Samaritans believed the testimony of a woman (a discredited witness in Jewish culture) but the Jews throughout the Gospel of John did not believe Jesus' own testimony?

- Jesus dismantled several social and religious customs in this story. What does this say to us as God's people who are called to point others to the Light?

respond

Close your time in prayer.

session four

Begin your time together by dimming the room and lighting a candle or a strand of string lights to illuminate your space. Ask a volunteer to lead the group in prayer, opening yourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read John 5:1-18 in The Voice translation. Assign group members different parts to read (Narrator, Jesus, Disabled Man, and Jewish Leaders) for a dramatic effect.

Interpretation help: Like the Samaritan woman at the well, the man who was paralyzed was at a water source. True to John's nature, there is a symbolism to this detail. Wells were a symbol of betrothal and marriage in the Jewish tradition—because Isaac, Jacob and Moses all met their wives at wells. This pool of water also reminds us of what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman in 4:14—"I offer water that will become a wellspring within you that gives life throughout eternity."

REFLECT

- **Optional:** If your group is following along with the reading plan, spend a few moments discussing any reflections you have from your reading. What did you notice? How did God speak?

- The pool of Bethesda was a well-known place of healing—not just for Jews, but also for Gentiles. It has been suggested the pool was a natural spring that periodically bubbled-up, producing soothing water for those in pain. Nevertheless, Jesus seems to have come here with the sole intention of finding someone to heal—on a Sabbath, nonetheless. Notice Jesus is the one to approach the man and initiate conversation. Why do you think Jesus did this?

- Jesus' question is a peculiar one: "Are you here in this place hoping to be healed?" Why do you think Jesus asked this question? If we turn this question on ourselves as readers, what happens?

- This healing is different from other healings in the Gospels, because there is no mention of the man's faith. What might this tell us about God's work in our lives?

- It's easy to criticize the Jews for their consistent observance of the Sabbath, but we must remember that they were trying to honor God the way that they knew best. Historically, their disregard of the Sabbath had created a disrespect for God's highest values in their society. However, they failed to realize the Sabbath was designed to value human life. What are the dangers of getting the Bible "right" but getting love "wrong"? What are some specific ways we as followers of Christ are prone to do this?

- Jesus cares about the man's body and the state of his soul before God. What does this tell us about God? Us as humans? The calling God's put on our lives?

respond

Pray as a group for those who need God's healing. Ask the group members to name specific people who need physical or spiritual healing. If there is someone in the group who needs healing, lay hands on them (with permission) and commit them to God's care.

session five

Begin your time together by dimming the room and lighting a candle or a strand of string lights to illuminate your space. Ask a volunteer to lead the group in prayer, opening yourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read John 8:2-11 in The Voice translation. Assign group members different parts to read (Narrator, Jesus, Pharisees, Woman) for a dramatic effect.

Interpretive help: In order to accuse someone of adultery, they had to be caught in the act. Since the penalty for marital unfaithfulness was death, this rule was very strict. It was thus rare for someone to be charged and convicted. The fact that this woman was caught probably signifies a trap had been laid for her—possibly by her own husband. Strangely, the man she was involved with was not brought before Jesus, too. Perhaps he was in on the plan to trap the woman. We'll see in our study today this whole situation was also a ploy to trap Jesus.

REFLECT

- **Optional:** If your group is following along with the reading plan, spend a few moments discussing any reflections you have from your reading. What did you notice? How did God speak?

- The passage tells us the scribes and Pharisees made the woman stand before the entire group. This was completely unnecessary; the normal protocol would have been to place her in a holding cell and then summon Jesus. It's in our human nature to point out others' flaws and sins. Why do you think this is the case?

- The text makes it clear this was a trap for Jesus (v. 6). What would happen if Jesus pronounced judgment on the woman? What would happen if Jesus let her "off the hook"? What would you have done in an impossible scenario like this, where all your reactions would be perceived as "wrong"?

• No one knows what Jesus was writing in the sand. Some think He was listing the Ten Commandments, some think He was writing the specific sins of those present, some think He was simply doodling, and some think He was purposefully diverting the attention from the woman, so as not to add to her shame. What do you think Jesus was doing?

• Verse 7 reminds us all of us have sinned; none of us have the credentials to pass judgment. Why do we as believers often have the tendency to become self-righteous? What factors might contribute to this mentality?

• Who do you identify most with in this passage: the woman (struggling with shame or guilt), the Pharisees (judging others for their sins while ignoring our own) or Jesus (in tune with God's grace, offering forgiveness)?

• Jesus told the woman to leave her life of sin (v. 11). Typically, we respond to Christ's forgiveness in one of two ways: either we continue our habits of sin, or we live a life shackled to shame and guilt over what we have done. What makes it so difficult to simply accept Christ's forgiveness and be changed by His mercy?

respond

Section the group off into pairs and take turns confessing sins to each other. This need not be overly soul-baring or uncomfortable—confessions can be general (“I’ve been saying unkind things about those who vote differently than I do.”) or vague (“I yelled at my kids last week.”). After a person has shared, the listener will respond with, “God loves you and does not condemn you.” Then come back together as a group and close in a brief word of prayer.

session six

Begin your time together by dimming the room and lighting a candle or a strand of string lights to illuminate your space. Ask a volunteer to lead the group in prayer, opening yourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read John 11:1-44 in The Voice translation. Assign group members different parts to read (Narrator, Jesus, Disciples, Thomas, Martha, Mary, Jews, Others) for a dramatic effect.

Interpretive help: In ancient thought, a person was only pronounced completely dead after three days. They thought a person's spirit could hover over the body for a while before returning. This period of time helped account for why a person might appear dead (such as if they're in a coma) and then "resurrect" a few hours or days later. The fact that Lazarus had been buried for four days signaled to the original listeners that Lazarus was fully dead—this wasn't some kind of faux-death illness. This was nothing less than a miracle. Perhaps this was why Jesus waited a few days before coming to Lazarus.

REFLECT

- **Optional:** If your group is following along with the reading plan, spend a few moments discussing any reflections you have from your reading. What did you notice? How did God speak?
- It's alarming that Jesus did not go to Lazarus as soon as He heard the news about Lazarus' illness. Does it make you uncomfortable to think about Jesus using such a serious situation as a teaching moment (v. 4)? What is your reaction to the idea God might allow something in your life so God can be exalted?
- Compare and contrast Martha's response (vv. 21-27) and Mary's response (v. 32). Notice the same wording. Why do you think they respond differently? What does this reveal about them? Which reaction do you relate with more in this situation?

• Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the source of all life; those who believe in Me will live even in death. Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never truly die" (vv. 25-26). In Western Christianity, we tend to emphasize Jesus' death more than we emphasize Jesus' resurrection. Why do you think this is? What are the drawbacks to this perspective?

• Lazarus' resurrection is both a spiritual and a physical reality for those who are in Christ. Spiritually, this renewal of life reminds us of the new life God has given us in the here and now. How is resurrection a powerful metaphor for the spiritual reality Christ gives us? What does it mean for us to "take off our grave clothes" (v. 44)?

• Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus is also a preview of our physical future as followers of Christ. Jesus will not abandon us to our graves but will one day bring our physical bodies back to life (see 1 Corinthians 15). How does this future inform our present way of living?

respond

To close, hand out pieces of paper cut to look like tombstones. While listening to the song "Glorious Day" by Passion, "Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery," or "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," ask each member to write a message on their tombstone. It can be a line from the song, from the passage today, or a prayer from the heart. The following are a few examples:

"[Name], come out!"

"The Old Made New"

"Where, O death, is now thy sting?"

After sharing your tombstones with each other, close your session in prayer.

